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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000864

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E AND PRM/AFR
LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA-WATCHER
CJTf-HOA FOR POLAD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [DJ](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: ICRC ON ERITREAN POWS AND ITS WORK IN DJIBOUTI

REF: DJIBOUTI 767

Classified By: PolOff Rebecca K. Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With regional support from Nairobi, Djibouti's very small International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) office continues to play an active role in monitoring prison conditions, transmitting messages between refugees and their families, and helping to train Djiboutian security forces in international humanitarian law. As the Djibouti-Eritrea border dispute continues, Djibouti retains custody of approximately 46 Eritrean defectors/deserters (reftel) and an unknown number of Eritrean prisoners of war (POWs). While actively monitoring the conditions of both groups in custody, ICRC Djibouti has urged Djibouti's United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office to take the lead in finding a resolution for the defectors/deserters, while ICRC concentrates on its core POW mandate. END SUMMARY.

ERITREAN POWS AND DEFECTORS/DESSERTERS

¶2. (SBU) ICRC Djibouti office chief Moustapha Mohamed Barkad told PolOff on October 30 that ICRC had visited Eritrean POWs as well as defectors/deserters. Barkad said that each POW had been given three minutes of phone time to communicate with family members, and that ICRC had provided small items such as games. Barkad described detention conditions as "good," and reported close coordination between his office and the National Police and National Security Chief in facilitating visits.

¶3. (SBU) Barkad stressed that while the POWs fall directly under ICRC's mandate, he was "pushing" UNHCR to get more involved in the situation of the defectors/deserters. He said that while the GODJ "didn't know what to do" with the defectors/deserters, UNHCR had promised "some action." Barkad said that UNHCR was continuing to work with the Ministry of the Interior--their normal interlocutor on refugee issues--but questioned whether they were coordinating effectively enough with the GODJ's national security apparatus. Barkad confirmed that the National Eligibility Commission had begun interviewing other refugees. However, Barkad reported hearing that the Commission had halted work for about a week, and said that ICRC was trying to confirm this information and find out what had caused the pause.

ICRC OPERATIONS IN DJIBOUTI

¶4. (SBU) Monthly visits from ICRC's regional Nairobi office support ICRC Djibouti's team of three Djibouti City office staff and three field officers. Although ICRC Djibouti is

small, Barkad said, Djibouti and its port function as an important ICRC supply hub for the region. Locally, Barkad characterized the national Red Crescent association as "not very tough," "heavy and difficult to push," and lacking in human resources. Barkad said that ICRC had tried to provide both financial resources and capacity-building to develop the local association, and was now funding salaries for a local dissemination officer, disaster management officer, and finance officer. Barkad also reported that the national Red Crescent had traditionally been involved in drought relief, and was now beginning a program to assist 19,000 drought victims throughout the country.

HUMANITARIAN LAW EDUCATION

15. (SBU) Barkad said that the ICRC had worked with Djibouti's National Police, Gendarmerie, armed forces (FAD), and Ministry of Education to develop and implement international humanitarian law training programs. Barkad said that while collaboration with the National Police and especially the army had been successful, programs with the Gendarmerie had proven more "problematic." Barkad said that normally, a staff member from ICRC's Nairobi office comes to Djibouti for a few weeks each year to work with the FAD at their Hol-Hol training camp. Barkad said he was especially pleased that cooperation with the Ministry of Education on the incorporation of international humanitarian law education into national curriculum materials--a project begun in 1999--was finally starting to progress, with trainers trained and the publication of some materials slated for 2009.

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PROTECTION & COMMUNICATION

16. (U) ICRC continues to visit Djibouti's Gabode Prison regularly. Barkad said that ICRC Djibouti visited Gabode up to twice monthly, primarily to collect and distribute Red Cross Messages (RCMs) to and from foreign prisoners and their families. (NOTE. In 2007, ICRC reported collecting 59 RCMs from prisoners in Djibouti, and distributing 49 messages to prisoners. In addition, ICRC reported collecting 501 RCMs from civilians and refugees, and distributing 738 RCMs. END NOTE). At Gabode, ICRC has also worked with the Ministry of Justice to improve sanitary conditions, and has distributed soap, cleaning agents and kitchen equipment.

17. (SBU) Barkad said that he has noted vast improvements in conditions at Gabode, citing better security, safety, and treatment of prisoners. Barkad attributed some of the impetus behind these changes to President Guelleh's "personal interest," dating from his stint as National Security Chief. Barkad said that ICRC had taken an active role in helping to train the new dedicated prison guard force, which began taking over from the National Police guard personnel in September. ICRC helped develop regulations for the new service, and brought in a Senegalese expert consultant to help in training the new force. In total, Barkad said, the new recruits had received six months of military training, and three months of training in human rights, interacting with prisoners, and prison management.

18. (C) COMMENT. Despite its modest footprint, ICRC Djibouti has played an important and positive role in monitoring Djibouti's prison conditions and facilitating contact between refugees and their families. Amidst the unresolved Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute and confusion over how to deal with Eritrean defectors/deserters, ICRC Djibouti is again playing a helpful role--both in tracking the welfare of Eritrean POWs, and in gently lobbying UNHCR to accelerate its response to the situation of the defectors/deserters. END COMMENT.

